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Health Secretary to tour Tar Creek

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Oklahoma's Secretary of Health is visiting Picher and Cardin today on a fact gathering mission that he hopes will help him prepare a report for Gov. Brad Henry on the health effects of abandoned mining operations in the northeastern corner of the state.

"The governor wants to know more about the health of people living in the Tar Creek site," Health Secretary Tom Adelson said. "I don't think I can give him a complete report without visiting the area and talking to people."

Adelson was scheduled to meet with area health care professionals and local residents at the Picher Housing Authority community center at 10 a.m. today.

His visit was expected to include a tour of abandoned lead and zinc mining sites in the area in and around Picher and Cardin, two northeastern Oklahoma communities at the center of a 40-square-mile Superfund site that has been on the federal priority list for cleanup since 1979.

The abandoned mining district contains hundreds of played-out and collapsed mines and is a source of polluted air and contaminated ground water that has seeped into private and municipal wells.

Almost \$100 million has been spent by state and federal agencies attempting to cleanup the site, which contains the cities of Cardin, Commerce, North Miami, Picher and Quapaw. About 4,000 people live within the boundaries of the site.

Details concerning Adelson's visit have been closely held, but he is expected to here from health professionals that they would like to see residents of Picher and Cardin moved away from the site as part of a federal plan supported by U.S. Rep. Brad Carson, D-Claremore.

Carson unveiled a \$50 million plan last month that would buy out about 1,200 Picher and Cardin residents and about 60 commercial property owners who operate businesses within the site.

U.S. Sen. Jim Inhofe, R-Tulsa, has proposed a competing \$50 million plan that would fund the first phase of a cleanup in secondary areas outside of Picher and Cardin. Inhofe's plan does not include any funding for relocation of residents.

"I think a voluntary buyout should be offered," said Mary Happy, a research assistant who is working in the area on a Harvard University project. "I think there are families with children who need to be offered an opportunity to move from a site that is dangerous to their children because of lead contamination."

Dr. Mark Osborne, a Miami family practitioner who has also been involved in research projects, said that recent studies have determined that children living in Picher have blood lead levels that are four times the national average and six times the state average.

“It’s fairly simple,” Osborne said. “The first point is that lead toxicity is well established and provides permanent neurological damage to children. The second point is lead exposure continues to exist. In the most recent study, 13 percent of children tested in Picher had elevated blood lead levels.”